Philosophical Naturalism and the Cognitive Science of Religion

Robert N. McCauley

Center for Mind, Brain, and Culture

Emory University

http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~philrnm/

Philosophical Naturalism
and
the Cognitive Science of Religion

1. philosophical naturalism
2. maturationally natural cognition
3. religious forms as cognitive by-products
4. some implications: psychological and philosophical

part 1: philosophical preliminaries: naturalism in philosophy

1. continental vs. analytic

2. from natural philosophy to science

3. philosophical naturalism

part 1: philosophical preliminaries: naturalism in philosophy

1. Sellars' manifest vs. scientific images
2. Quine's assault on the analytic/synthetic distinction
3. Quine's epistemology naturalized
4. Churchlands' manifest vs. scientific images of ourselves and our minds

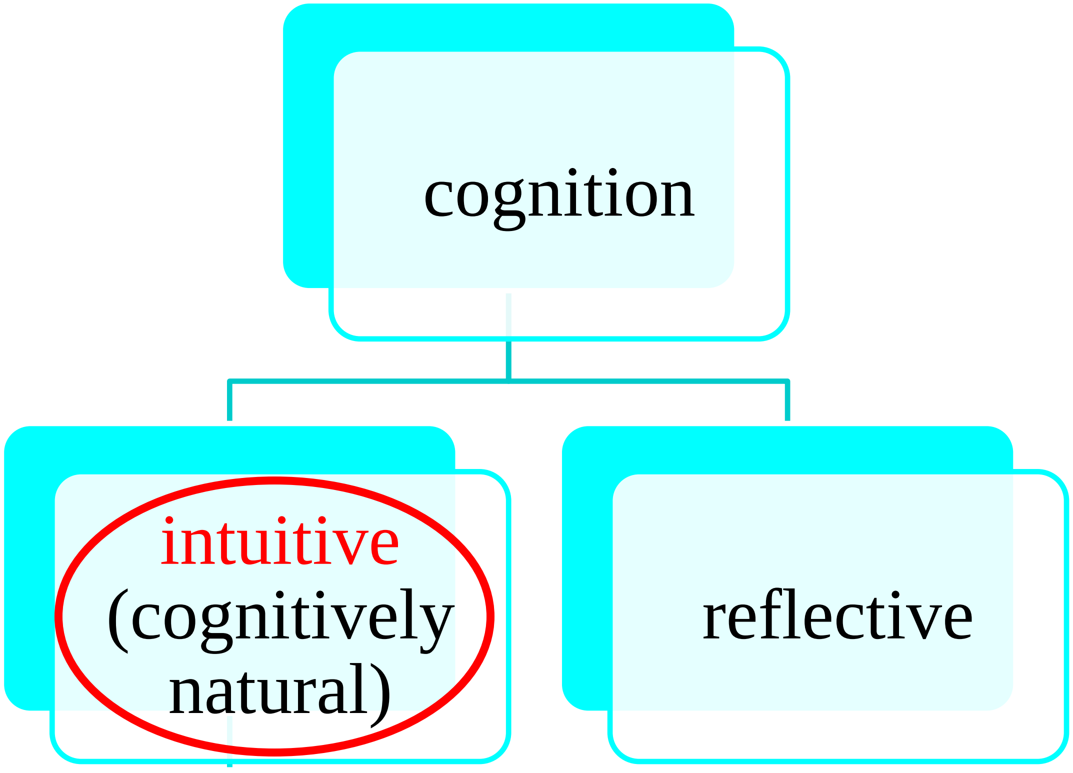
part 2: maturationally natural cognition: dual processing theories

reflective	vs.	intuitive
off-line		on-line
conscious		unconscious
deliberate		automatic
slow		fast
verbal		non-verbal (mostly)

part 2: maturationally natural cognition: intuitive cognition

specific beliefs or actions that arise automatically and instantaneously and are held or done without reflection

1. general, commonsense notion
2. presumed sound, though underdetermined
3. declarative and procedural
4. two sources


cognition
intuitive (cognitively natural)
reflective

part 2: maturationally natural cognition: features

1. address basic problems
2. appear early
3. define normal development
4. do not depend on any culturally distinctive support
5. constitute domain specific systems at the end, if not at the beginning
6. engage automatically when triggered by distinctive cues

part 2: maturationally natural cognition: some candidate domains

language

face recognition





part 2: maturationally natural cognition: some candidate domains

language

face recognition

basic physics of solid objects

contamination avoidance

theory of mind

part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products:

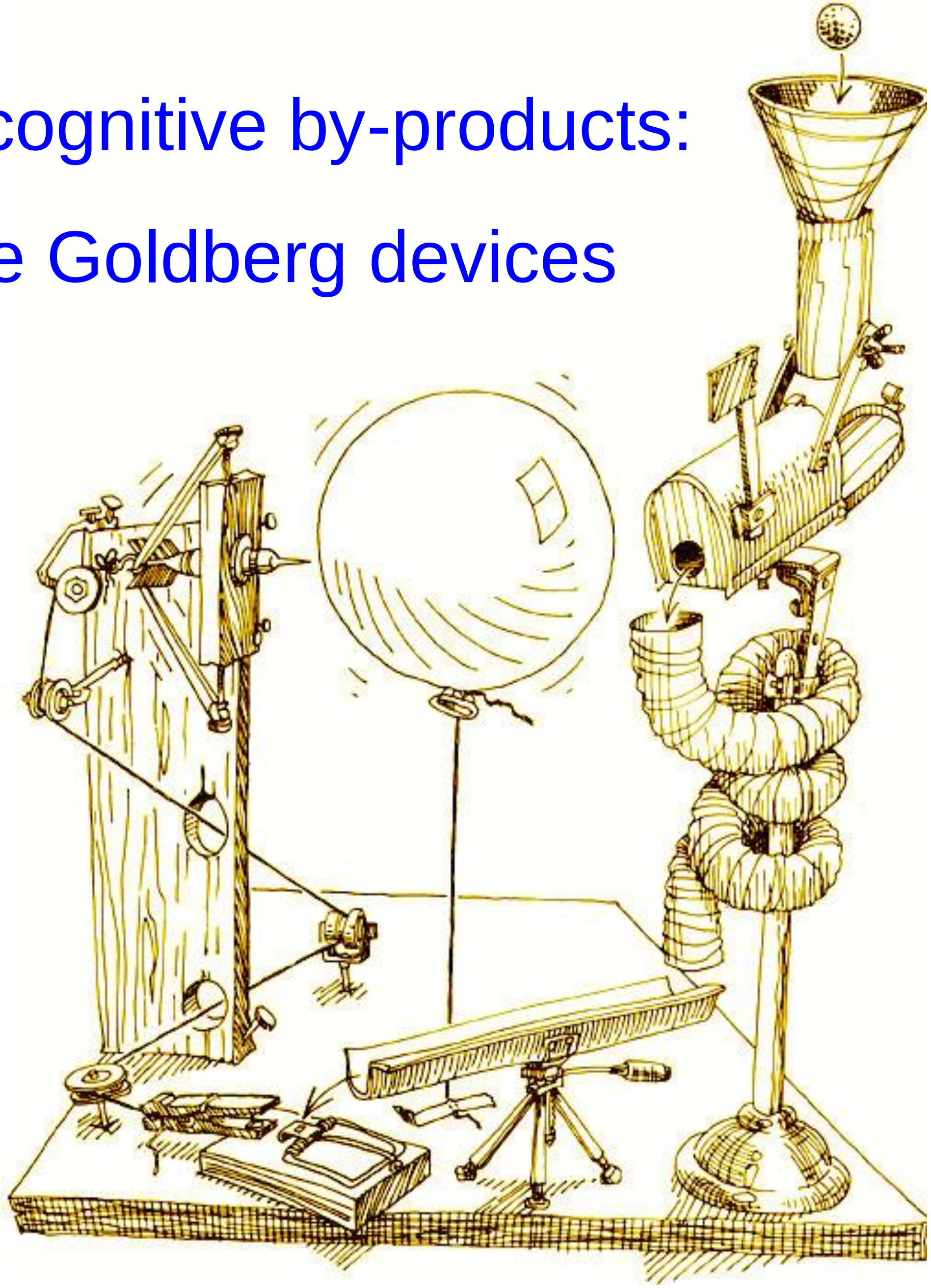
religions as Rube Goldberg devices

1. ordinary components

2. disparate items

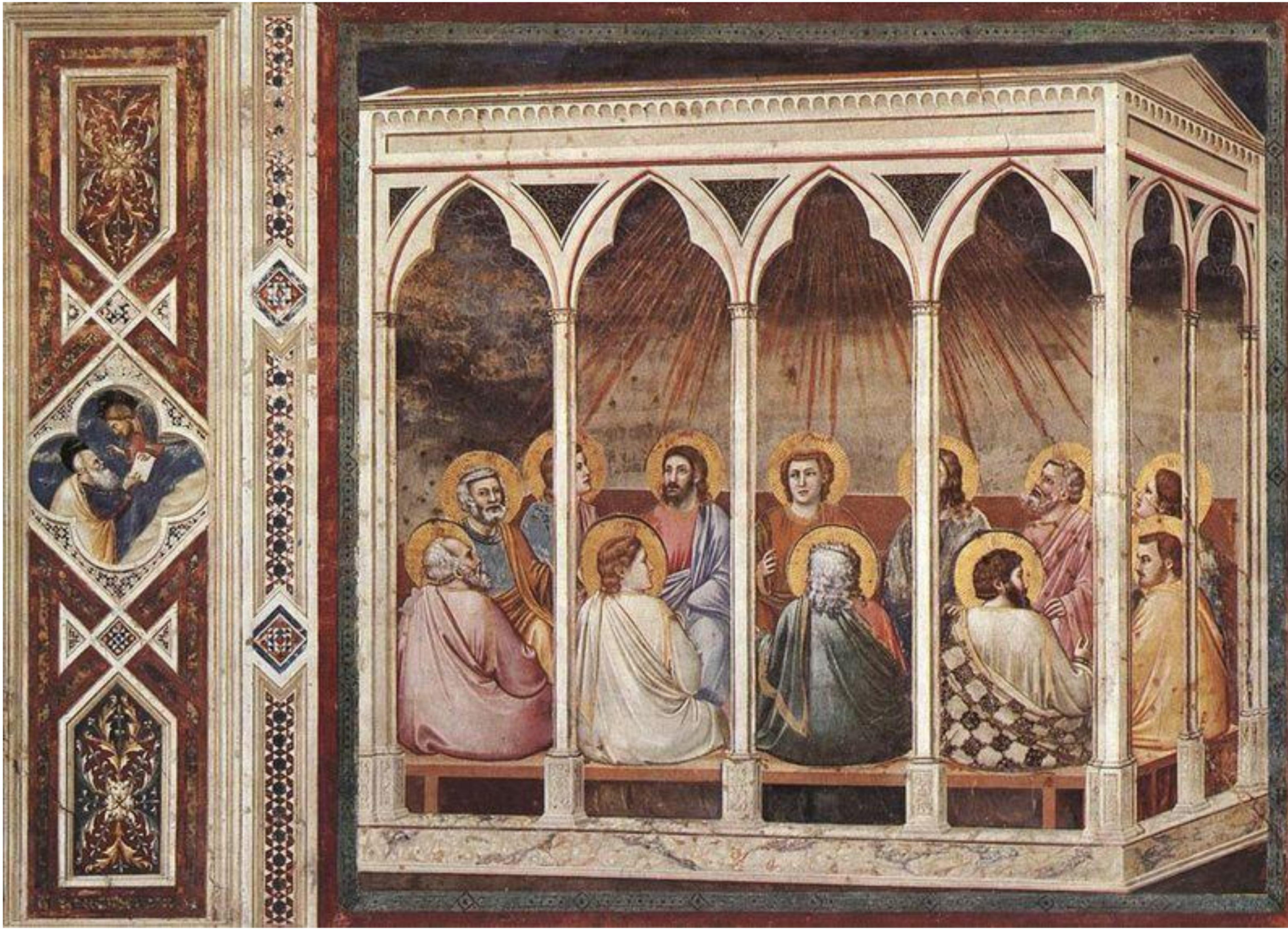
3. fascinating and complicated machines

4. simple functions



part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: examples

-- language



part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: glossolalia

1. Why does glossolalia have the phonological characteristics that it does?

2. Why does glossolalia manifest the prosodic forms that it does?

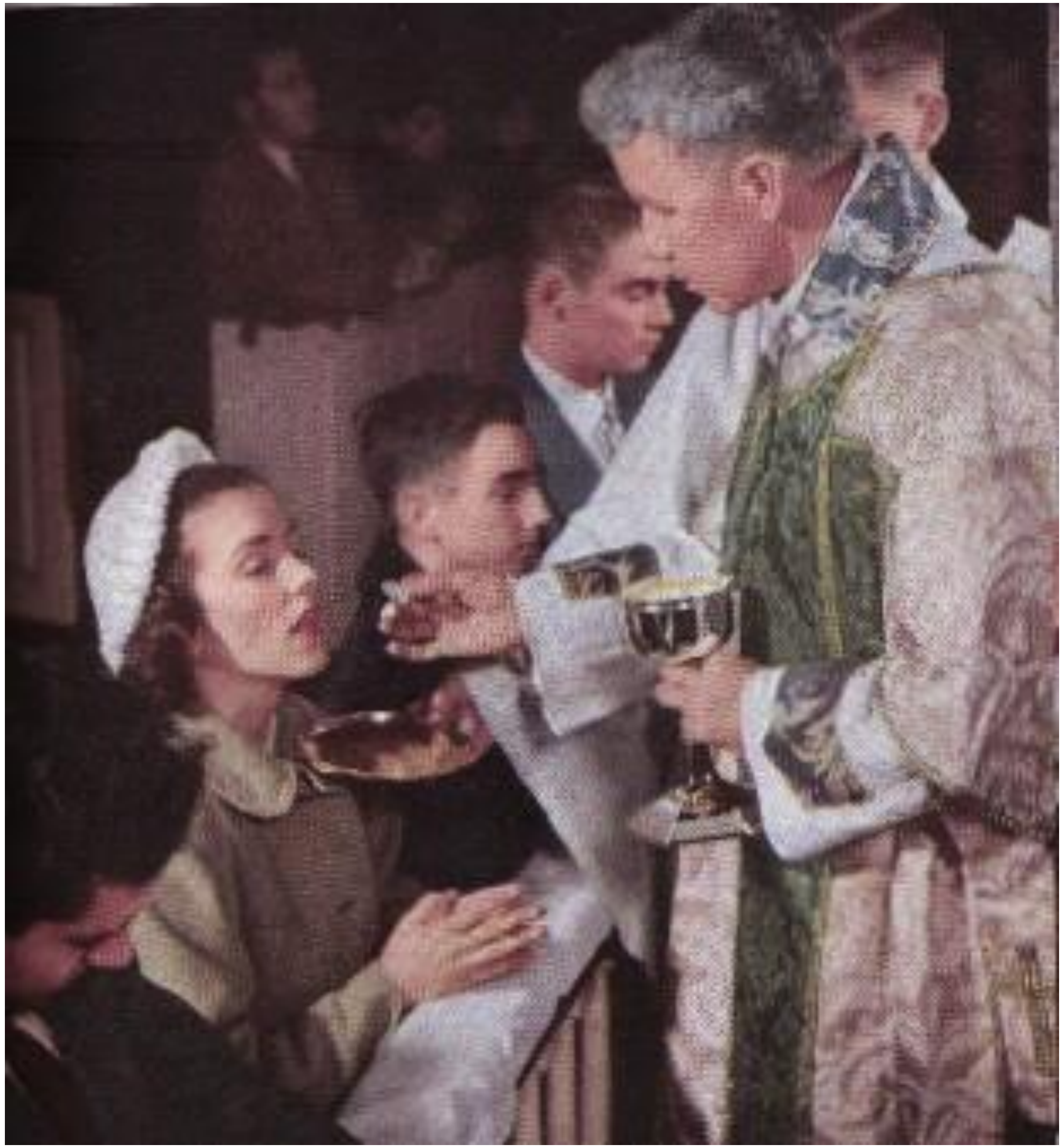
3. Why does glossolalia recur both within and across religious systems?

part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: examples

-- language

-- contamination avoidance







part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: examples

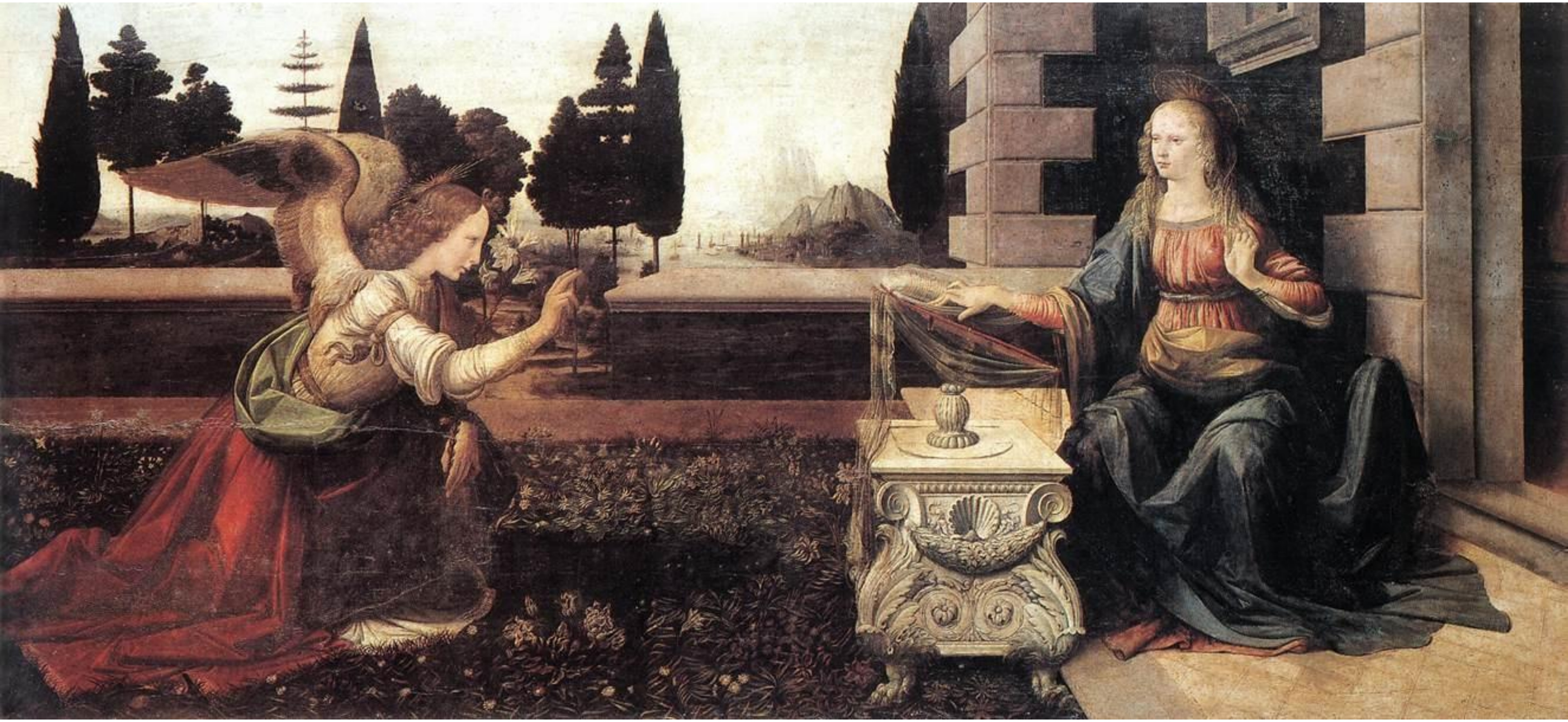
-- language

-- contamination avoidance

-- theory of mind

part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: theory of mind

- myths are narratives



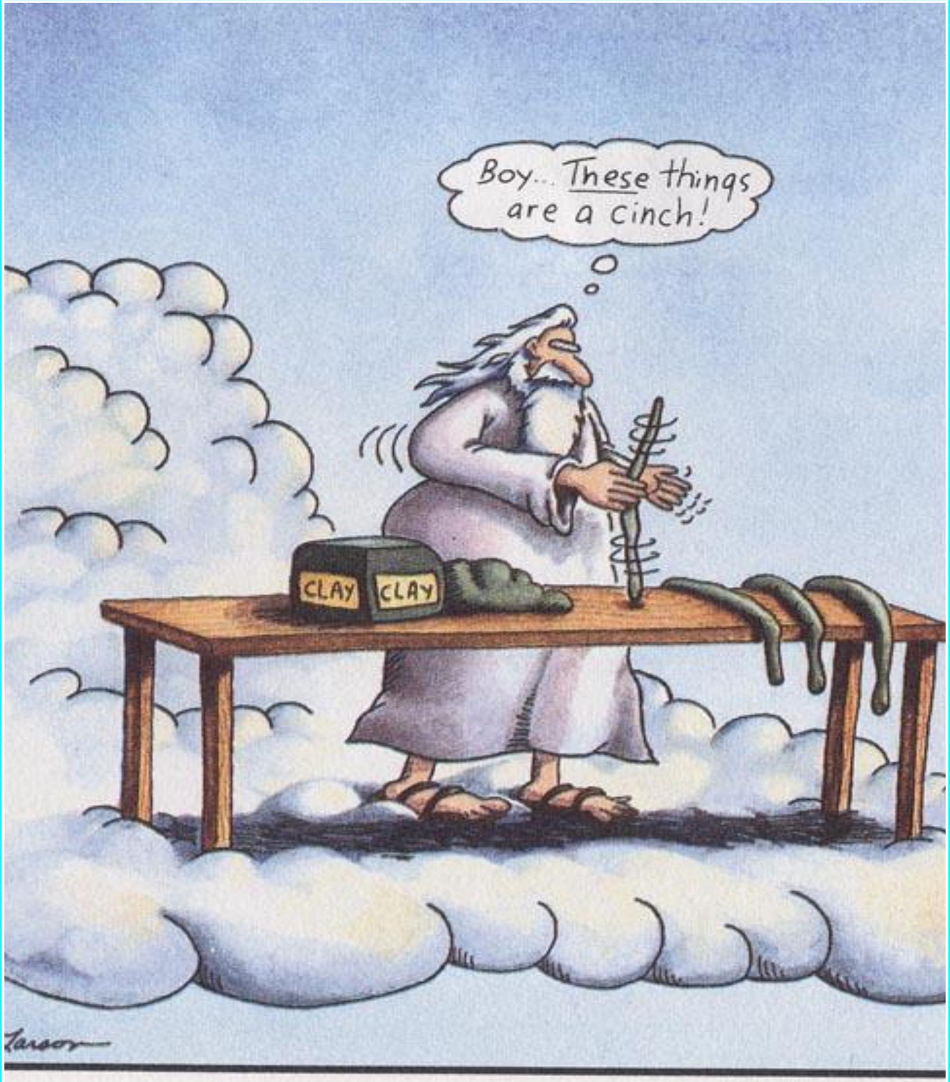
part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: theory of mind – myths are narratives

. . . The implausible becomes plausible, indeed certain. Give us a little story, a script, something born of our own imagination, and our own natural tendencies, cognitive or emotional, do the rest.

Piatelli-Palmarini, M. (1994). *Inevitable Illusions: How Mistakes of Reason Rule Our Minds*. M. Piatelli-Palmarinin and K. Botsford (trans.). New York: John Wiley and Sons, p. 137

part 3: religious forms as cognitive by-products: theory of mind

- myths are narratives
- rituals are actions
- the gods are (mostly) like us



God makes the snake

part 4: some implications - psychological

1. misbegotten comparison

part 4: some implications - psychological misbegotten comparison

	unrestricted use of agency	restricted use of agency
reflective (off-line, conscious)	theology	*science*
maturationally natural (on-line, intuitive)	*popular religion*	common sense explanations

part 4: some implications - psychological misbegotten comparison

We have come to see that our minds spontaneously follow a sort of quick and easy shortcut, and that this shortcut does not lead us to the same place to which the highway of rationality would bring us.

Our spontaneous psyche is not a kind of 'little' or lesser reason, nor is it an approximate form of rationality.

Piatelli-Palmerini, M. (1994). *Inevitable Illusions*, M. Piatelli-Palmarini and K. Botsford (trans.). New York: John Wiley and Sons, pp. 142 and 159

part 4: some implications - psychological misbegotten comparison

	unrestricted use of agency	restricted use of agency
reflective (practiced naturalness)	theology	*science*
maturationally natural	*popular religion*	common sense explanations

part 4: some implications - psychological

1. misbegotten comparison

2. inevitability of theological incorrectness

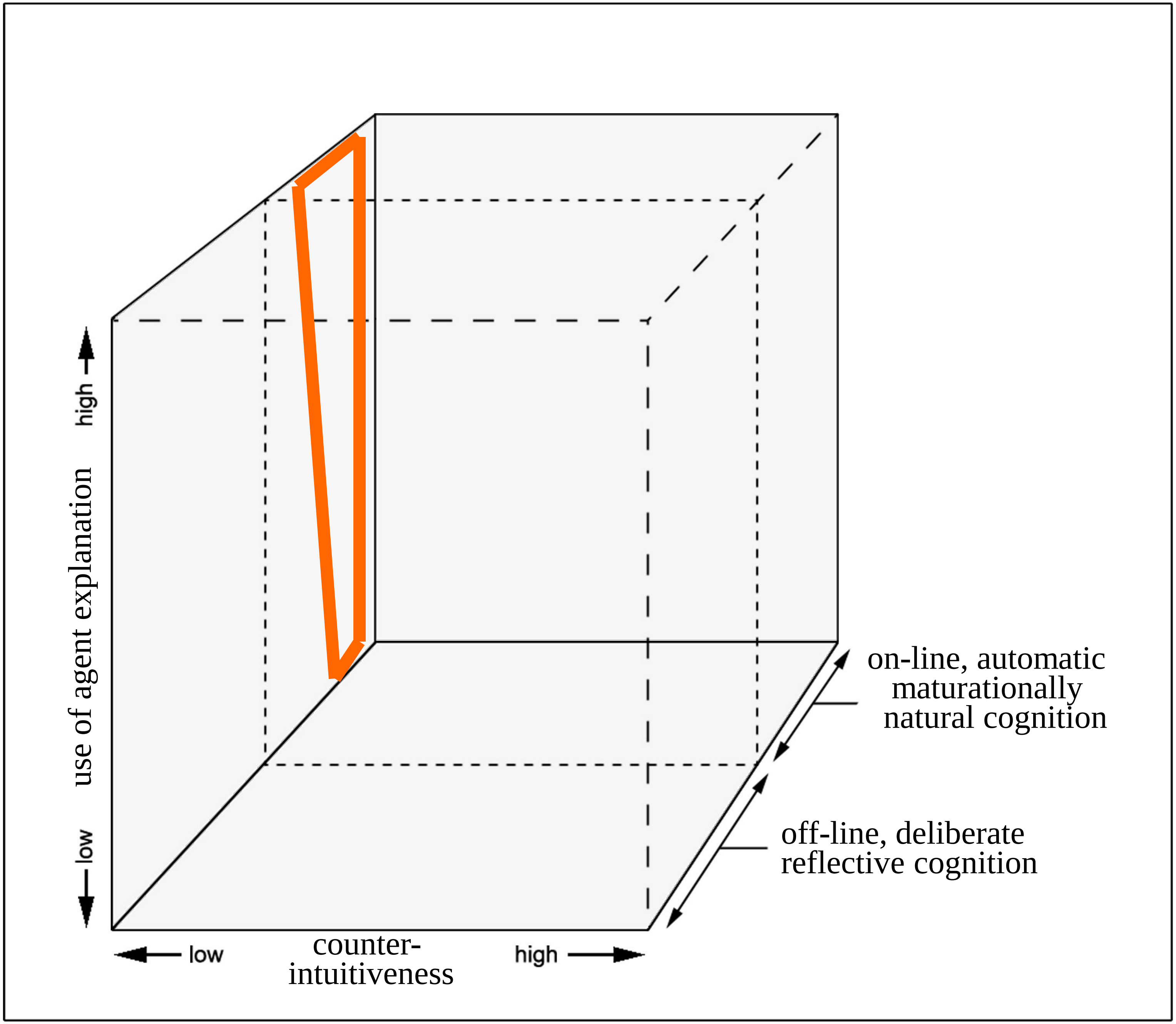
part 4: some implications - psychological inevitability of theological incorrectness

-- doctrinal religious systems (at least)

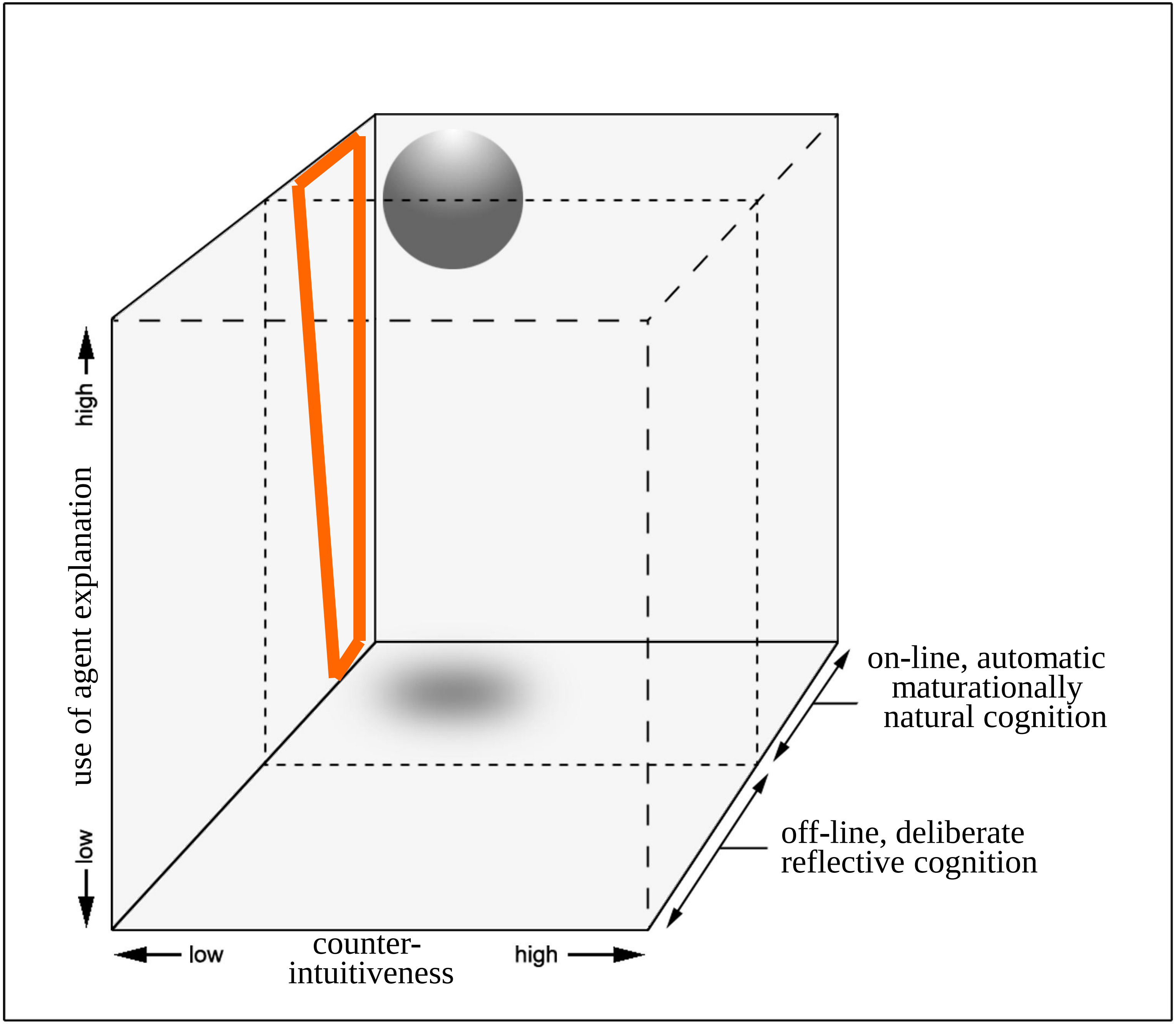
-- systematic codification of religious ideas

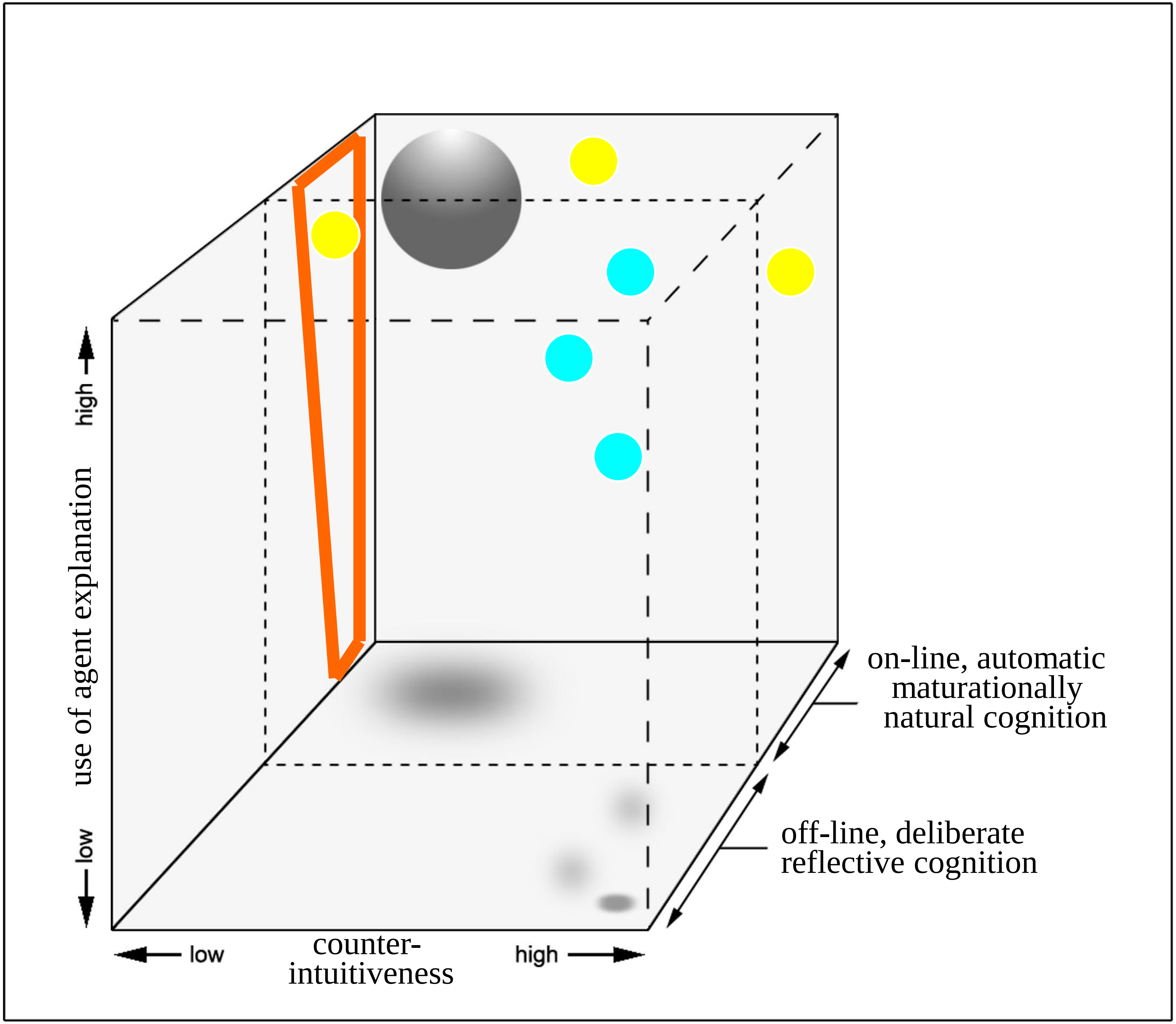
-- ecclesiastical hierarchies teach and enforce doctrines





use of agent explanation
high
low
low
counter-intuitiveness
high
on-line, automatic maturationally natural cognition
off-line, deliberate reflective cognition


high
use of agent explanation
low
on-line, automatic
maturationally
natural cognition
off-line, deliberate
reflective cognition
low
counter-
intuitiveness
high


high
use of agent explanation
low
on-line, automatic
maturationally
natural cognition
off-line, deliberate
reflective cognition
low
counter-
intuitiveness
high

part 4: some implications - psychological

1. misbegotten comparison

2. inevitability of theological incorrectness

3. relevant disabilities will render religion baffling

part 4: some implications - psychological relevant disabilities will render religion baffling

-- regardless of intelligence

part 4: some implications - psychological relevant disabilities will render religion baffling

What, in fact, autistic individuals seem to lack . . . is . . . the specific capacity to set up representations sustaining propositional-attitude structures specific to the theory-of-mind domain.

Even autistic subjects with relatively high IQs fail false-belief tasks that normal 4- and 5-year-olds, and Down Syndrome children with much lower IQs, find easy.

Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1992). *Beyond Modularity: A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 137 and 168.

part 4: some implications - psychological relevant disabilities will render religion baffling

-- regardless of intelligence

-- regardless of arousal in religious rituals

part 4: some implications - psychological relevant disabilities will render religion baffling

-- failure to make eye contact

-- failure to point for the purpose of sharing attention

-- failure to distinguish things with minds (mind-blindness)

-- failure to identify with conspecifics

part 4: some implications - philosophical

1. other species in the genus *Homo*

2. arguments relying on inference to the best explanation: facts and the theories

3. focus on religious experience

4. Reformed epistemology and the status of maturationally natural intuitions